

Oakland Tribune

Politicians vote no on bills, still take credit

East Bay lawmakers dismiss accusations

By Lisa Friedman WASHINGTON BUREAU

Wednesday, February 26, 2003 - WASHINGTON -- Just because a politician votes "no" on a bill doesn't mean he or she can't claim credit for it once it passes.

At least that is what Reps. George Miller, D-Martinez; Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto; Pete Stark, D-Fremont; and Lynn Woolsey, D-San Rafael demonstrated recently when they broadcast their legislative prowess in obtaining money for local flood-control projects, roads, buses and schools.

The only problem is, they actually voted against that local funding.

All four lawmakers defended their recent decision to vote against the massive \$397.4 billion spending bill, into which funding for local projects was tucked, saying they objected to provisions they considered anti-environmental. They also maintained they had not acted hypocritically by sending press releases touting their role in securing funds, since they were the ones who made sure that local projects were included in the first place.

But government watchdogs called it misleading.

"These are politicians who are talking out of both sides of their mouth, quite obviously," said Gary Ruskin, director of the Congressional Accountability Project.

Objecting to an overall bill while agreeing with some specific portions -- such as funding for a local flood control project -- is a reasonable point of view, Ruskin said. But, he added, "It's misleading to then put out a press release trumpeting your local project."

The massive spending measure signed by President Bush on Thursday finances every federal agency except the Department of Defense for the remainder of the budget year that runs through Sept. 30.

It includes tens of billions of dollars for hometown projects, such as \$6 million for flood control in Petaluma, \$90,000 for a children's library in Palo Alto, \$375,000 for Contra Costa County watershed surveys and \$200,000 to study flooding problems in Fremont.

Some conservative lawmakers attacked the mammoth tab as overloaded with pet projects, known as pork. Democrats, meanwhile, complained that the bill does not give enough money to education and homeland security. Many Democrats, particularly in the Bay Area, objected to environmental provisions that could increase logging in national forests while paring back land conservation programs.

Both sides protested that the legislation was rushed, giving lawmakers barely any time to read the more than 3,000 pages of spending decisions before voting on them.

Miller, in a speech on the House floor, called the process "a major affront to democracy."

"Legislation sits here and nobody has the ability to read it. Nobody knows what is in it, but we are going to be asked to vote on it," he said. "It is a corruption, an outright corruption of the basic and fundamental principles of our government."

In the Bay Area, only Reps. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, Mike Honda, D-San Jose, and Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, voted in favor of the spending bill.

Reps. Ellen Tauscher, D-Alamo, and Zoe Lofgren, D-San Jose joined Miller, Eshoo, Stark and Woolsey in voting against it.

Some then turned around and hailed their ability to secure local funds.

Miller, in a press release sent out the day after the bill's passage, said "I am honored to announce that projects beneficial to parts of Contra Costa and Solano counties received crucial funding from the government last night."

Asked to explain the decision to vote against the bill while heralding local monies, a spokeswoman said, "While Congressman Miller was pleased to have won local funding for local projects in Contra Costa and Solano counties, the overall omnibus bill was a disaster for local schools, local first responders and for the environment."

A press release from Eshoo after her "no" vote announces funding for such local projects as the Palo Alto children's library and a zero-emissions bus demonstration program in San Mateo County. It includes a statement from Eshoo saying, "During the toughest of economic times, these critical funds represent an important partnership with our communities and region, turning plans into reality."

Stark's press release touts funding for foster care and flood prevention, and includes a quote from the congressman that says, "I'm grateful to have been able to secure this funding and look forward to continuing to help in this process."

A spokesman for Stark said the congressman had concerns about measures in the legislation he considered anti-environmental, and could not vote for it. But, the spokesman said, "He was involved in making sure those (local) appropriations were included in the bill."

Keith Ashdown, a spokesman for the government spending watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense, said he is used to seeing lawmakers come up with new and creative ways of taking credit for local spending. He took a generous view of the practice, saying it all comes back to Tip O'Neill's famous saying that all politics is local.

Contact Lisa Friedman atlfriedman@angnewspapers.net .

<"You want to be seen as somebody who has an ability to deliver for your constituents. You don't want to fall prey to the 'what-did-you-do-for-me-lately crowd,' " Ashdown said.

"Lawmakers will go to the ends of the earth to take credit for pork that they can get for their district. Whatever opportunity they have to write a press release on any project they get for their district, they're going to take that opportunity."